Assessing the Bottom-Up Review

By ANDREW F. KREPINEVICH, JR.

F–16 Falcon from the 187th Fighter Group in Tandem Thrust '93.

U.S. Air Force (Val Gempis)

TRAP team aboard *USS Austin* training to rescue airmen during covert operations.

U.S. Navy (Johnny Bivera)

The recent Bottom-Up Review of defense requirements for the post-Cold War era offers us an insurance policy to minimize security risks to the United States. Like other insurance policies it is accompanied by a blizzard of data, underwritten by the best minds in the field, and brings with it a hefty price tag at $1.2 trillion for five years of coverage. While it has attractive features, overall the plan offers insurance we probably do not need, at a cost the Clinton defense budget likely can't afford. Equally disturbing, it may not insure us against the security challenges that we are most likely to face beyond the five-year coverage period.

U.S. Army (Jesse Seigal)

1st Cavalry Division troopers during infantry training.

We buy insurance to cover risks. Against what risks is this new plan designed to insure? This is difficult to discern since the administration has yet to reveal its national security strategy. In the absence of that guidance, the review assumes the United States must be able to act unilaterally in fighting and quickly winning two nearly simultaneous major regional conflicts (for planning purposes, another Gulf War and a war on the Korean peninsula). It argues that, in the event we deploy forces to fight in one region, another hostile state might initiate aggression elsewhere if we are unprepared to fight and quickly win there as well. Interestingly, this planning requirement was originally established during the Bush administration.

Insuring quick success in two simultaneous regional wars is expensive. But what are the odds of such an event occurring? Since America became an active global power following World War II, it has fought regional wars in Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf. The United States committed the majority of its combat power to each of these contingencies, a point worth noting since the Soviet Union was the other major regional contingency during two of the conflicts. Yet the Soviet Union never attempted to exploit this situation by initiating aggression in another region of the world. Nor did Moscow pressure one of its client states to do so.

Furthermore, while force is important in deterring aggression, the Nation's political leaders can play a crucial if not decisive role in deterrence. The Korean and Gulf Wars themselves might have been averted altogether had the United States clearly stated its intention to fight in the event of aggression. One should recall Dean Acheson's speech in which he placed South Korea outside of the U.S. security perimeter in the Far East, and the ambiguous message transmitted by Washington to Saddam Hussein on the eve of his invasion of Kuwait. Force is no substitute for a clear sense of national interests and a strategy to preserve them. For deterrence to work, our resolve must be both clearly communicated and credible. Unfortunately, the current administration's track record thus far in crises such as Bosnia and Somalia leaves a good deal of room for improvement.

In any event, given President Clinton's early focus on peacekeeping, peacemaking, nation building, and humanitarian assistance operations, meeting two regional contingency requirements may prove to be an elusive goal, especially considering shortfalls in strategic airlift. Presumably, part of the requisite combat capability could be made up by our allies. But the review asserts that U.S. forces must be sized and structured to act unilaterally. In some ways that begs the question of what constitutes President Clinton's national security strategy. Are we buying an insurance policy to meet the Pentagon's regional contingencies? To meet the administration's peacemaking objectives? The review concluded that we will not have the forces to conduct operations in places such as Somalia and Bosnia and, at the same time, meet the regional conflict contingency requirements.

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More worrisome, amid debate over short-term requirements we run the great risk of failing to realize that unlike the Cold War the greatest challenges to our security lie beyond the review's five-year coverage period.

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It is in the so-called *out years* that we will likely face the consequences of military technology diffusion and weapons proliferation—including those of mass destruction—in the Third World, and possibly a new great power challenge. Secretary of Defense Aspin himself cited these two challenges in identifying his "four dangers" to U.S. security.

But with a few notable exceptions—theater ballistic missile defenses, for one—the review is focused on near-term threats. Why does the review accord relatively little emphasis to longer term dangers? If (more likely when) Third World countries acquire nuclear weapons, late-model cruise and ballistic missiles, and access to satellite photography, the Armed Forces will have to operate in very different ways to retain the freedom of action—and success—that they enjoyed in the past. Yet the review calls for a force for the next century that is essentially a slimmed-down version of the Bush administration's base force which was crafted when the Soviet Union existed. This is hardly surprising since the review wargamed U.S. forces fighting the kind of tank-heavy forces that characterized the Cold War. In a sense, the military is falling into the same trap as other successful military organizations: it is preparing to fight the last war better instead of the next war.

Furthermore, history rarely presents cases where one military organization has dominated for a protracted period. Typically another challenger (or coalition) arises relatively quickly. If the United States dissuades or deters the rise of a major challenger—and the prospect of another arms race—it will be due in large part to an effective, long-term national security strategy and the force structure to support it. Unfortunately, that is not the kind of insurance policy the Pentagon is proposing. The Clinton budget cannot pay the premium on this five-year, short-term insurance policy. Secretary Aspin admitted to being $13 billion short of the $104 billion savings target mandated by Clinton over the Bush plan. And with Congress rejecting the administration's call for a one-year freeze on military pay, the Pentagon is very likely to be more than $30 billion short. Moreover, the ends-means gap is likely to widen over the next five years unless military operations and support accounts are reduced substantially more than in past efforts.

A force structure that is too big for the budget may suffer in numerous ways. Siphoning money from research and development can beggar capabilities and our insurance against long-term risks, cutting operations and maintenance can erode readiness, and reducing procurement can lead to a lag in modernization and eventually to a procurement balloon payment in the out years when equipment must be replaced. In essence, we are mortgaging our future security. When we may need insurance most, we could well be financially strapped by an insurance plan that has expired.

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It also makes sense to take out a group insurance policy against common risks and thereby reduce individual premiums. The Bottom-Up Review presumes that the Armed Forces must be prepared to act alone in regional conflicts. But it seems reasonable to assume that regional states that are most threatened would join us to defend themselves. It is also encouraging that in many areas of potential instability our prospective allies are wealthier than our potential adversaries, and they can well afford to pay their share of the premiums to insure against risks to our common interests.

The Aspin team must be commended for providing a point of departure for a long overdue debate over defense needs. But we can't afford a rich man's approach when purchasing insurance for defense. Nor are we likely to be able to buy our way out of future mistakes as easily or as painlessly as in the past. JFQ

Report on the Bottom-Up Review

For an account of the methodology used to develop the force structure options analyzed in the Bottom-Up Review, see the special summary of the *Report on the Bottom-Up Review* in The Joint World on pages 103–09 of this issue of *JFQ*.